

MIDTOWN SOUTH

EXISTING LAND USE

Midtown South is the fifth largest of Blacksburg's special planning sectors at approximately 1,324 acres. This sector is the southern border to the central business district of Blacksburg and extends from the intersection of Ellett Road to the south along the eastern Town border towards Harding Avenue then back towards Clay Street and the Town-Virginia Tech border. Approximately 46 percent of the area is residential, the majority of which is low-density single family residential. The sector encompasses a major commercial node, and some of the largest tracts of open space within the town.

Unique Characteristics

Many residential neighborhoods are extensively landscaped, meticulously maintained, and include older mature trees. The single-family residential neighborhoods located in Midtown South are well known for their good exterior maintenance and appearance. The residential neighborhoods provide great examples of urban forestry with tree-lined streets and houses nestled under full and mature tree canopy. These neighborhoods have excellent views of the downtown, university, permanently preserved Hoge land, public parks, and the surrounding mountains. The neighborhoods of Midtown South have the characteristic of being close to shopping, work, and school. Many people can walk to their destinations, or just for pleasure, since sidewalks and short distances to destinations are common.

This sector is predominantly residential. Midtown South contains nearly 3,700 dwelling units in 2001, and contains a population of approximately 8,700 giving this planning sector a fifth of Blacksburg's resident population. The proximity of the Virginia Tech campus contributes to a higher than desired percentage of rental housing in this sector as reflected in the number of apartments and subdivided houses rented to students. The majority of the high-density housing is concentrated in the Windsor Hills apartment complex along Harding Avenue. However, despite this significant concentration of apartments, 46 percent of the acreage in Midtown South is developed as single-family housing and only five percent as high-density apartments and townhouses.

Several of the residential neighborhoods are historically significant due to the character, age, and quality of housing. The Miller Southside neighborhood was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district in 1990. This early suburb of Blacksburg began developing in 1913 and continues to be a favored home to university faculty and other professionals. The Airport Acres neighborhood developed immediately following World War II and is composed primarily of modest frame Cape Cod style houses. In addition several other

architecturally significant buildings are located in the Mountain View and Allegheny neighborhoods. Several of these neighborhoods may benefit from the architectural protection that an historic overlay district would provide.

Gables Shopping Center and Blacksburg Square, located along South Main Street, is the primary commercial node serving this sector. This commercial area provides regional shopping as well as neighborhood convenience, and supports a variety of restaurant and shopping opportunities. The two shopping centers combined have over 150,000 square feet of retail space. Gables shopping center was recently renovated with facade improvements. This shopping center provides a clean, well-planned, and aesthetically pleasing appearance.

Margaret Beeks Elementary School serves as an anchor for the sector's neighborhoods. This school currently enrolls 384 students and serves as a gathering place for parents, children, and the community at-large. The school is a recreational and cultural center for the surrounding neighborhoods. The elementary school also provides definition and identity to the area. The recent controversy involving the relocation of the Blacksburg Middle School out of the downtown area has raised the community's concern as to the future of Beeks Elementary as it ages.

Several large tracts of public and private open space exist in Midtown South. On the eastern edge of this sector, along Palmer Drive, are The Hill Municipal Golf Course and the Hoge property with a permanent conservation easement. Together these two parcels total 83 acres of land. In addition there is the middle school property and the high school football field. Existing trails and bike lanes run throughout the sector and many more are planned to maximize connectivity and continuity. There are also a significant number of privately held parcels that are undeveloped in the eastern portion of this sector, which will allow for the expansion of low density residential to the east.

People feel safe from crime and traffic accidents. Much of this is a perception of safety. Children can generally play outside on neighborhood streets without much fear of traffic though this is becoming an increasing problem. Crime rates are low in Blacksburg compared to many other localities. Although nearly half of Blacksburg's population is in the "high crime age group" of 18 to 24, Blacksburg's overall crime rate per 100,000 population is half the rate of the neighboring town of Christiansburg, and nearly one-third the rate of its sister university city of Charlottesville.

Critical Issues

Retaining the high quality of established neighborhoods will be the greatest challenge. Currently the neighborhoods in Midtown South are very desirable places to live, but there is some concern that more houses in the medium and low-density residential areas will convert from owner-occupied to rental housing. The

challenge is to ensure that rental housing within neighborhoods does not adversely impact the area's high quality of life, and that the neighborhoods retain their attraction to families and owner occupants. Also, the proliferation of medium and high-density residential dwellings throughout the sector is a concern.

Neighborhoods with high concentrations of rental housing create challenges for all residents. Many neighborhoods in Midtown South are experiencing a transition from owner-occupied single-family homes to rental houses. An increasing concentration of students in these neighborhoods is a point of friction in many areas. As with other areas, unlawful assemblies, over-occupancy, noise, poorly maintained houses and yards, and disorderly public behavior frequently draws criticism from neighborhood residents. Residents throughout the Midtown South sector also perceive themselves to be at risk unless these ordinance violations are reduced or eliminated. The town's Neighborhood Enhancement Program addresses nuisances historically associated with rental housing by enforcing occupancy and property maintenance codes and educating citizens on related issues.

There is concern over the future use of the Blacksburg Middle School property on South Main Street. The Old Blacksburg High School is located at the corner of Eheart and South Main Street. The site is approximately 20 acres and the main building includes 107,680 square feet of space. This site cannot sit vacant or be only partially used. Several uses have been proposed for the site including a vocational school, magnet school, municipal office space, arts and crafts space, retirement center, and other civic oriented uses. The property may accommodate a variety of uses, however no use should be of an intensity or scale that it is incompatible with the surrounding neighborhoods.

Pedestrian access from residential areas to commercial and university areas is a challenge. This issue is related to the community's desire to keep Blacksburg pedestrian and bicycle friendly. The Midtown South sector has a fairly complete sidewalk system in place, along with trails and bike lanes. Many residents take pride that they have the option to safely walk to stores and commercial centers without the need for a vehicle. There are some notable gaps in this pedestrian network that need to be filled. Gaps in the sidewalk, trail, and bike lane networks make it more difficult and less safe to access destinations without an automobile. Crossing South Main Street throughout this sector is a major concern.

Reduce speeding and other traffic violations. Speeding and traffic is a townwide issue that is of particular concern to the residents of the Midtown South sector. South Main Street, Palmer Drive, Grissom Lane, and Ellett Road are streets that routinely have occurrences of speeding and traffic light violations. Each neighborhood in this sector has asked for increased police enforcement on the various roads within the sector and some have investigated the feasibility of installing physical road improvements to slow traffic.

Controlling traffic congestion and parking congestion is an issue that will become more acute. In many respects the problem is related to population pressures on a town center that was constructed for a population one-tenth the current size. Additionally, congestion problems relate to the fact that over 16,000 students live off campus, and many of them commute through the Midtown South sector. This generates heavy vehicular traffic on narrow roads. The young and mobile student population also leads to parking problems, particularly in the older residential areas where houses were built for one family with one or two cars, not three students per house with three or more cars. Traffic flow should improve with the completion of the Hubbard-Southgate Road and the 3A-interchange project in the South End sector.

The presence of a regional airport authority is both a potential benefit and a concern. The Virginia Tech / Montgomery Executive Airport Authority provides the town an opportunity to impact the development and operations of the airport. The authority should use the airport as an economic tool to attract and support businesses in Town. Other proposed improvements include the construction of additional T-hangers and improved fueling facilities. Adjacent residents have expressed concern about the potential for increasing noise levels and air traffic, and with adjusting flight patterns to minimize an aircraft's effect on the area's neighborhoods.

The deer population is an increasing problem for this sector. The large amount of open space just outside of Town and on the town borders is an ideal habitat for deer and provides an opportunity their infiltration into Town neighborhoods. Conflicts with deer are increasing creating traffic safety concerns that are significant since a large percentage of the population either resides in or commutes through this sector to work. The deer are also a nuisance for private property owners as the deer tend to graze on gardens and landscaping found in residential neighborhoods. The deer population needs persistent attention by the town in order to alleviate public safety concerns and protect private properties.

Virginia Tech is a concern to this sector. Much of this sector directly abuts the Virginia Tech Campus. The goals, vision, and building patterns of the university campus directly affect the quality of life in this sector. Enrollment increases substantially affect the proportion of renter vs. owner occupied housing. In addition, changes in the on-campus transportation system can dramatically affect commuting patterns in this sector of Town. Virginia Tech is the largest employer in Blacksburg and a large proportion of the residents of Midtown South are either employed by the university or otherwise supported by their presence. There is great interest in the community to see the university remain a successful, viable institution. There is also some concern in the community that Tech's long-term future plans are unknown, beyond local control, and will occur regardless of the impacts on the surrounding non-university areas.

This sector is ideally situated for wireless technology companies to locate their facilities. The sector's proximity to the university campus and a significant portion of the town's population makes it a prime location for communication antennas, stealth telecommunication towers, and other wireless service facilities. Large, conspicuous cellular or broadcast towers are a threat to the high quality of life in the area, especially since the majority of the sector is low density residential. Wireless technologies are encouraged to use antennas on existing structures, camouflage their towers, provide the appropriate buffers, and minimize both the number and height of towers to ensure a minimal impact on the surrounding neighborhoods. The proposed water tank at The Hill Municipal Golf Course may be an excellent location for these facilities to be inconspicuously located within the community.

Keep the schools in Midtown South tied to their neighborhoods. This challenge reflects a community fear based on a perceived lack of control. The schools in Blacksburg are under the jurisdiction of Montgomery County, not the town. The controversy over the future of the 45 year old middle school building that resulted from the School Board's decision to move the middle school to Price's Fork Road has raised concerns in the community over the future of Margaret Beeks Elementary School, along with the town's other schools, over the next 20 to 50 years. It is important to Town residents that Montgomery County schools are of high quality programmatically and that they physically remain in the neighborhoods. Beeks Elementary School fosters a family oriented and small-town neighborhood atmosphere in the sector.

Bring additional retail into Town. Midtown South residents are concerned about losing retail establishments to the larger, suburban malls and discount shopping centers outside Town. Diversifying the types of stores located along South Main Street's commercial nodes is of prime importance. Although gross sales statistics show the retail sector of Blacksburg's economy is healthy, residents regret the loss of variety and department stores to suburban shopping centers. There is a concern that large commercial areas that would attract larger retail stores are being lost to university office, classroom, and storage uses.

Neighborhoods

Midtown South is a diverse area of neighborhoods. There are currently five neighborhood planning areas in this sector. These neighborhoods vary greatly in terms of median household income, home values, and owner vs. renter occupancy. Racially and ethnically these neighborhoods also show considerable diversity.

Airport Acres

The Airport Acres neighborhood developed shortly after World War II. This neighborhood is primarily composed of modest Cape Cod style houses that have been laid out on a grid street system, which dead-end near the university – town

border. This neighborhood includes Margaret Beeks Elementary School, which serves as one of the community's anchors. The neighborhood has a good pedestrian transportation system that includes easy access to the Huckleberry Trail, several sidewalks, and a bike lane. This pedestrian system provides access to the Gables Shopping Center located on the eastern border of the neighborhood along South Main Street.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ The Hubbard-Southgate road project has been in development for several years. This road is designed to improve the town's traffic circulation system by providing another access for commuters into the Virginia Tech campus, bypassing the downtown and Country Club Road entrances. The project will positively impact the quality of life in this neighborhood by alleviating through traffic from Airport Road. The negative impacts of the new road can be minimized by: 1) keeping the roadway close to the airport and away from the residential neighborhood, 2) using appropriate road design to minimize speeding, 3) keeping the current dead-end roads in the residential portions of Airport Acres, 4) using appropriate amounts of vegetative and topographical screening.
- ◆ This neighborhood has actively sought to influence the management and operations of the VPI airport. This airport has historically been operated by Virginia Tech, and has been sporadically responsive to the neighborhood's concerns. The Virginia Tech / Montgomery County Regional Airport Authority will create an opportunity to positively address some neighborhood issues, however there is concern that the pressure to use the airport to promote economic development will negatively impact the neighborhood. The airport can mitigate operational effects by limiting the routine hours of operation, improving the buffers between itself and adjacent residential areas, not allowing for larger or expanded jet airliner use, and improving flight patterns around the airport.
- ◆ Traffic safety, particularly speeding violations, is considered a problem townwide. Residents feel that the quality of life within the neighborhood is being negatively impacted by traffic safety problems. Reduced speeding and traffic violations on the collector and arterial roads surrounding the neighborhood through increased enforcement, physical traffic measures, and innovative technologies is critical the neighborhood's quality-of-life. The presence of Margaret Beeks Elementary School within the neighborhood, along with a high single-family resident population, makes speeding a particular concern. Airport Road is the primary road on which speeding is problematic within the area.
- ◆ This neighborhood has a large number of houses that are in a price range that is affordable, attractive for families and young professionals, and encouraging to potential homeowners. Conversely this also makes the neighborhood attractive for investors buying rental properties. This neighborhood has seen houses convert from owner-occupied to rental property at an increasing rate. Maintaining the neighborhood's attractiveness to families is critical to the area's character and high quality of life.

Allegheny

The Allegheny neighborhood is the northern most neighborhood in the Midtown South sector. This neighborhood is served primarily by Harding Avenue and Lee Street. This neighborhood is largely single-family residential development however it also includes the Sector's largest apartment complex, Windsor Hills. The single-family residential portion of the neighborhood is defined by a series of curving roads and cul-de-sac streets that changes to a grid system closer to the Downtown sector.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ The placement of utility lines below ground throughout this neighborhood is a primary neighborhood objective for improving the area's quality of life. This enhancement makes the neighborhood less susceptible to power outages due to ice storms, and improves the aesthetics of the area.
- ◆ Traffic safety is a major issue, particularly speeding and other traffic violations. Residents feel that the quality of life within the neighborhood is negatively affected by speeding. Reducing these traffic violations utilizing the methods suggested for Airport Acres is critical to this neighborhood's quality-of-life. Harding Avenue is of particular concern to this neighborhood.
- ◆ Possible growth in Virginia Tech enrollment could increase the conversion rate of properties from owner-occupied to rental housing. The negative impacts of off-campus student housing in low density residential areas may be mitigated through the rental permitting program, code enforcement, and increasing landlord awareness toward code and nuisance related issues.
- ◆ Improving pedestrian and bicycle facilities along Harding Avenue from the town border to Patrick Henry Drive is vital to this neighborhood's pedestrian transportation system. A development plan is needed that outlines specific rights-of-way necessary for appropriate road improvements, bike lanes, sidewalks, and any traffic calming measures.

Grissom-Highland Circle

The Grissom-Highland Circle neighborhood is the southeastern neighborhood of the Midtown South sector. This is a low-density residential neighborhood that has developed in a suburban style. Several collector roads bisect this neighborhood including Country Club Road, Palmer Drive, Nellie's Cave Road, Marlinton Street, and Grissom Lane. The completion of both the Grissom Lane and Palmer Drive sidewalks has drastically improved pedestrian safety throughout the neighborhood. Several vacant parcels are located throughout the neighborhood allowing for infill residential development. Nellie's Cave Park, in the southern end of the sector, is the only large tract of public open space in this neighborhood. The Hill Municipal Golf Course lies along the area's northern border.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ Nellie's Cave Road serves as a major corridor to Town for Montgomery County residents. Land development within the county has a substantial impact on traffic volumes and impacts quality of life in the neighborhood. Routing traffic safely through and around the residential neighborhood in a manner that disperses and minimizes the traffic's impact on the area is critical. Future road designs should incorporate features that calm traffic and minimize speeding and other traffic violations. The completion of the Hubbard-Southgate Connector and the 3A Interchange may help alleviate some through traffic within the area in the short/medium term.
- ◆ Speeding has been cited as a problem townwide. In this neighborhood, Grissom Lane, Palmer Drive, and Country Club are the streets that generally have speeding problems. Speeds on these roads need to be monitored and enforced on a regular basis.
- ◆ The deer population is becoming increasingly problematic for this neighborhood. The large amount of open space just outside of this neighborhood and along its borders provides an ideal habitat for deer. As indicated in *Critical Issues*, this problem needs innovative and persistent attention due to the high potential for traffic conflicts and property damage.

Miller-Southside

Located directly adjacent to the downtown this neighborhood has developed around a modified grid street system centered on Draper Road and Preston Avenue, extending south to Country Club Drive. The neighborhood is primarily low-density single-family housing, however along the neighborhood's border with South Main Street is a mix of both residential and professional office uses. This area developed primarily between the 1920's and 1930's as exemplified by the traditional architectural housing styles of Greek Revival, Colonial Revival, Bungalow, and American Four Square. The close proximity to both downtown and university amenities makes this neighborhood very attractive to both families and students. The architectural styles, mature landscaping, and extensive sidewalk system make this neighborhood very pedestrian friendly.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ Many of the residential structures were designed to accommodate one vehicle per house. Although this was an acceptable design standard in the 1930's, it has created a parking shortage for neighborhood residents.
- ◆ Infiltration of office and commercial uses into the neighborhood is a threat to the existing residential character. The high demand for office and commercial space has placed pressure on this neighborhood to alter its residential composition. Some office and commercial development currently exists along South Main Street, however expansion of these uses beyond South Main Street, into the neighborhood, is not desired. In instances where special use

permits are required, appropriate buffering, design, and architectural features should be utilized to mitigate any effect on the neighborhood's character.

- ◆ This area is heavily influenced by increases in Virginia Tech enrollment and is under constant pressure to convert traditional owner-occupied houses into rental units. Property maintenance, occupancy violations, and the physical deterioration of some houses are significant issues. This neighborhood is low density residential and family oriented. Effectively addressing code and nuisance issues associated with some rental properties is necessary for maintaining the neighborhood's appeal to families and young professionals.
- ◆ Speeding is a major concern. In this neighborhood, Draper Road, Preston Avenue, and Airport Road are the streets that generally have the most traffic violations and they should be monitored on a regular basis.
- ◆ The houses in this neighborhood are of an age and quality that merit inclusion in a National Register Historic District, and could benefit from the creation of a local historic overlay district. The portion of this neighborhood currently included in the state and nationally recognized Miller Southside Historic District has access to federal and state tax credit programs, but is not subject to architectural controls. Inclusion in an historic overlay district could provide a level of architectural protection that is designed to preserve the unique historical character of the neighborhood, as well as provide local, state, and federal tax incentives for building renovations.

Mountain View

The Mountain View neighborhood is a low-density residential neighborhood. Several major roads including Country Club Drive, Palmer Drive, and South Main Street bind the residential neighborhood. This neighborhood has substantial tracts of both private and public open space including the Hoge conservation easement and The Hill Municipal Golf Course. There are also several vacant parcels within the neighborhood. These scenic open spaces provide excellent views of the surrounding area, and are critical to the neighborhood's quality of life. The completion of the Palmer Drive sidewalk has drastically improved pedestrian safety, however there are notable gaps in the sidewalk system within the neighborhood. Many of the houses located in this neighborhood are architecturally and historically significant. Portions of this neighborhood are currently included in the National Register's Miller-Southside Historic District.

Critical Neighborhood Issues

- ◆ Speeding is a major problem, as with the rest of the sector's neighborhoods. In this neighborhood Palmer Drive, Country Club Road, and South Main Street generally have the worst speeding problems. Another critical safety issue is red light runners, particularly at the intersection of Country Club Road and South Main Street. Traffic laws must be stringently enforced along these roads on a routine basis.

- ◆ The decision to move Blacksburg Middle School from its South Main Street location has caused concern over the future use of the building. The Old Blacksburg High School is located at the corner of Eheart Street and South Main Street. The site is approximately 20 acres and the main building includes 107,680 square feet of space. This site cannot sit vacant or only partially used, and several uses have been proposed including a vocational school, magnet school, municipal office space, arts and crafts space, retirement center and other civic-oriented uses. Any use should be at an appropriate scale that is compatible with the surrounding neighborhoods.
- ◆ Litter and debris are continual issues throughout Town. This is a particular concern along the major roads in this neighborhood and near the middle school property. This neighborhood desires to remain attractive to families and young professionals moving into the area.
- ◆ Sidewalk maintenance is the responsibility of private property owners but this is not well known throughout Town. The town should more strongly enforce the removal of snow and weeds from public sidewalks and begin a program to remove at the owner's expense within a certain period of time. Unremoved snow and ice pose dangerous public safety hazards for pedestrians.
- ◆ Possible increases in University enrollment could increase the conversion rate of properties from owner-occupied to rental housing. Although this is more of an issue for neighborhoods closer to the university and downtown, this neighborhood is under increasing pressure to accommodate more rental houses. Minimizing the effect of off-campus student housing in low-density residential areas through rental permitting, code enforcement, and increasing landlord awareness of code and nuisance related issues is essential.
- ◆ The privately held vacant land, not under a conservation easement, will develop in the future. This area is currently zoned for low-density residential housing. Any future development needs to consider traffic, parking, and runoff issues in order to minimize negative impacts to the neighborhood.
- ◆ The deer population is also a problem for this neighborhood. The deer are a continuing nuisance for private property owners and an increasing safety issue. Blacksburg must address this problem townwide and in conjunction with Montgomery County.

VISION

Midtown South is a place where it's easy and safe for pedestrians and bicyclists to get around Town. Multi-use trails connect residents within the sector to the Huckleberry Trail as well as the town's park system and downtown amenities. Historic buildings are preserved, well maintained, and owners readily utilize the town's design review board to receive architectural advice on projects.

Commercial areas are concentrated in attractive, landscaped nodes, and strip development is minimized. Residents are friendly and involved in their community. All residents are connected to the Blacksburg Electronic Village. There is a low crime rate. Neighborhoods retain their distinctive character, incorporating places of worship, diverse architecture, mature trees, and street fixtures appropriate to the character of the neighborhood. Conflicts between student and non-student residents are minimal and resolved in an amicable fashion. All properties and structures are well maintained and there is no physical distinction between rental and owner-occupied properties. Streets, public areas, and commercial areas are well landscaped.

Views of the surrounding mountains and downtown area are visible from several points throughout the sector. The sector has streetlights that provide a safe atmosphere, yet minimize light pollution. Midtown South is culturally and demographically diverse -- ethnically, racially, economically, and by age. This sector has neighborhood elementary schools. The former middle school site has been renovated as a multi-use, civic structure and is a community anchor and recreational space. This part of town is easy and safe to drive, bike, or walk through with minimal congestion. Vehicular traffic violations are reduced and do not adversely affect the quality of life.

Special Considerations

- ◆ The need for additional neighborhood parks should be examined, especially near the existing elementary school. Where feasible, the town should acquire property to provide public open space. Any new developments within or directly adjacent to this sector should include recreation space that accommodates the area's needs.
- ◆ A water tank is proposed for The Hill Golf Course to better serve the area. This facility should be constructed to minimize impacts to the area's view shed and maximize opportunities for multiple cellular antennas.
- ◆ The Rental Permitting Program should be expanded to include transitional residential housing areas within the sector. This is needed to offset the potentially adverse effects of an increase in rental properties as students move into neighborhoods.
- ◆ Office uses should be limited to arterial and collector roads. Office uses should not infiltrate into the existing residential neighborhoods. Office uses within, adjacent to, or at the entrance to residential neighborhoods should utilize the existing residential property on-site or construct the new building in a scale and design that does not detract from the character of the neighborhood.

- ◆ Places of worship are shown on the future land use map in their 2001 locations, because they are important anchors in a neighborhood and should be retained. They are an appropriate use in most neighborhoods when developed at a scale consistent with the surrounding community, as allowed by special use permit. The town does not wish to limit future locations of places of worship to the indicated map areas.
- ◆ Any development other than residential occurring adjacent to an alley should be prohibited from using the alley as a primary vehicular access.
- ◆ Improved pedestrian crossings at major roads such as South Main Street and Ellett Road.

Changes From Existing Land Use Map

Since Midtown South is already quite developed, few dramatic changes are seen between the 2001 and 2046 maps.

- In general the changes will tend to be in increasing residential density in areas closer to the university, near existing apartment or office developments due to high market demand for multi-family housing by students.
- Some small single-family residential houses will be built on currently vacant parcels, but most new residential development will be medium or high density residential.
- In response to the pressure for greater density, it is important that the town or other entities preserve open space as much as possible. Vacant land in this sector should be developed in a sensitive manner that preserves or enhances the character of the existing neighborhood, if not otherwise protected.
- The new Hubbard-Southgate Connector project will provide better access to Virginia Tech's main campus and alleviate congestion in the downtown area and along the western and southern neighborhoods of the sector.